

Coloured People in School Textbooks

The people of this country know little about coloured people: they are ignorant of their ways of life and the countries from which they come. In place of knowledge there is an amalgam of impressions and vague notions.

Because coloured people are recognised so readily as separate and different, there is a tendency to lump them together under a few crude, undifferentiated stereotypes. Most Englishmen probably feel that the nationalities of western Europe differ more from one another than do the vast variety of people from Asia, Africa and the Americas whose skin happens to be coloured. Moreover, difficulties of mutual comprehension and differences in appearance, social habits and moral conventions, all reinforce the tendency to adopt unfavourable stereotypes of coloured people.

For these reasons it is important that the mass of ignorance and even superstition, which provides a fertile source for all kinds of prejudice, should be replaced by a body of accurate and up-to-date knowledge. Such knowledge should be the basis for a realistic appreciation of the great diversity of coloured peoples. The large migration of coloured people to this country, the growing importance of the Afro-Asian states and the growing contrast between developed and underdeveloped countries make this an urgent task.

Schools are obvious places where the deficiencies in our knowledge of coloured people should be remedied. Teaching in English schools about Africa and Asia has been criticised for some time. For instance, a Nigerian woman teacher had this to say in *Colonial Students in Britain*:

‘When I have visited local schools I have seen pictures of Africa in the classrooms and I think they tend to portray the African as being more primitive than he is today. I think the attitude of the public is not surprising when you see what they are taught at school.’

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An investigation of what was to be found in school textbooks therefore seemed worth while. Fourteen history books and twelve geography books were obtained from two London comprehensive schools, where one might expect to find progressive and up-to-date teaching and textbooks. These books all deal in one respect or another with Asia, Africa or the Americas. They are all designed for pupils of eleven or more, but vary in the simplicity of their approach. Some are obviously more suitable for those taking 'O' level and others are appropriate for eleven and twelve-year-olds in the lower streams. Of course, this selection is not necessarily typical of all the books in use today; but many of those inspected are certainly in widespread use. Thus the analysis that follows gives only an indication of certain tendencies, rather than a complete picture of British textbooks.

In history textbooks the treatment of Asia and Africa varies, but one general criticism stands out. In all the history textbooks examined it is English, and to a lesser extent European, history that predominates, and even when attention is directed to Africa or Asia, it is the activities of European imperialists which are described. This tendency is well illustrated by Southgate's *An Introduction to English History* which contains a list of famous men and women, with very brief biographical particulars. 222 people are mentioned: of these, 135 are British, 53 are famous Europeans, but only 8 are of non-European descent, and of these 8, 4 are Egyptian leaders with whom Britain had dealings in the nineteenth century. Moreover, 32 explorers are mentioned, and another 37 whose chief claim to fame is their activities outside Europe or North America; but virtually none of those with whom they had dealings find a place. We hear of Philip Francis, who opposed Warren Hastings, but Gandhi is not mentioned. Eight explorers who looked for the North-West Passage are recorded, but not Sun-Yat-Sen, nor any Japanese or Negroes, nor any Indians, apart from Siraj-ud-Daula of the Black Hole of Calcutta. Maybe it is natural enough that English people should predominate in a history of England, but if fifty-three Europeans are included, together with many who were active in Africa and Asia, then one might expect a better balance of non-Europeans.

The treatment of Indian history best exemplifies this trend; India is given a fairly prominent place in all history textbooks, and at the same time India has a long and full history and a highly developed and distinctive culture. In *Builders of the Empire* by Williamson, reprinted as recently as 1949, there are three chapters on India, but they deal exclusively with the activities of the British: there is no mention even of the Mogul empire, and Hindus and Muslims and the way of life of Indians are only touched on in the context of the hostility aroused by the introduction of cartridges containing cow and pig grease shortly before the Mutiny. More commonly, textbooks contain a brief paragraph setting the background to British expansion in India in terms of the decline of the Mogul empire, and a

slight indication of the differences in religion and economic conditions within Indian society. But it remains true that the history of India, as taught in English textbooks, is the history of a few British conquerors and reforming viceroys. Symptomatically, one book, *Today through Yesterday*, Book 4, has a chapter entitled 'India Past and Present', which begins with the sub-heading 'The Story of the British in India'. It is not so much that the history is biased—though it is notable that nearly all the books mention the Black Hole of Calcutta, but not one of those examined had any reference to the Amritsar Massacre. The most serious failing is in the whole emphasis and choice of subject matter. Of course, British children may naturally be most interested in the activities of people from their own country, but one cannot properly understand a situation when the activities of only one of the protagonists is described.

This fault could be corrected in part if all history textbooks were brought up to date. Some textbooks speak of a 'present' that is already part of the past. Thus one passage in Elliot's *Our Yesterdays*, Book 3, published in 1939, says:

'Altogether by our own day, India has gone a long way towards becoming a self-governing country, though the difficulties standing in the way of this are still very great, and it is hard to see how soon it may happen.'

Of course the fact of India's independence is well enough known, but the implication is slightly disparaging. If greater efforts were made to bring books up to date, such statements would be excised and a full picture could be given of India's place in the modern world; pupils would hear about her five-year plans, her problem of increasing population and her influence in Asia, and some of the earlier emphases would be corrected. Moreover, this would give an idea of the problems of the underdeveloped countries and the ways in which the newly independent countries go about solving them. Such subjects are touched upon in geography, but they involve many fields that are outside the scope of geography, and being chiefly confined to the post-war era they are at present largely absent from history textbooks. In this way matters that are nowadays of immense importance are liable to be neglected in schools.

Geography textbooks cannot be accused of quite the same unrepresentative choice of subject matter as history textbooks: they do cover the whole of the world and they do describe differences in customs, economic organisation and race. However, the emphasis and modernity of presentation are sometimes at fault. There is a tendency to put too much emphasis on the primitive aspects of Africa, especially in the older books. Pictures of naked Africans are not uncommon, and there is perhaps an excessive amount of attention directed to pigmies and other primitive tribes. Pigmies are, of course, interesting, but it is they who will make the most vivid and lasting impression on a child's mind, because of their peculiarity. The

danger is that a child will then think of Africa largely in terms of pigmies. Thus Pickles, in *Africa, Australia and New Zealand*, devotes eight pages to 'The Congo Lands'; of these two are concerned with pigmies, and include a picture of five naked pigmies. Another book, *Africa*, by Silley, revised as recently as 1956, in its description of Nigeria contains a passage reminiscent of Rider Haggard:

'... in the main the natives are pagans, savage and war lusty, and practise fetishism. The Munshi tribes from the Benue to the Niger are particularly hostile, whilst the Yoraghums are cannibals.'

Another tendency is to emphasise the role of the European. Knapp-Fisher in *The World Today*, Book 4, says:

'The mass of African natives have little civilisation of their own and no history they can remember.'

In his account of Africa south of the Sahara, he gives great prominence to what the 'white man' has done. The 'black man' or 'natives' are also mentioned, of course, but generally in terms of what the white man has done for them or to them. The account of the move towards independence is quite inadequate. He says: 'In most areas the Governor and the white people frame the laws...', and then goes on to mention the 1951 constitution in Ghana. As the book was published in 1958, much more could have been said on this topic.

Knapp-Fisher's chapter on Africa is no doubt well intentioned; nevertheless, an African who read it would probably be offended by the use of such words as 'kaffir', 'natives' and 'black men', or statements such as 'three quarters of Ghana and Nigeria are covered with untamed jungle'. In fact the greater part of Nigeria is covered by park-like savannah, and there is only a tiny amount of virgin forest left. The African would also object to the scant attention given to what Africans are doing to govern and develop their own countries.

A much better example of teaching about Africa is found in *The Southern Continents*. Admittedly this is much longer. Its first chapter begins with the heading 'Every community has a history', it does not use derogatory words like 'kaffir', and it gives adequate attention to modern developments in health, agriculture, transport, industry and self-government and the problems that arise therefrom, without harping continually on the 'black man'-'white man' antithesis.

Another instance of contrasting styles of teaching is provided by the two following descriptions of Australian aborigines; the first occurs in Hobbs' *The Southern Continents and Asia*:

'Native human beings were few and very primitive. They became known as 'black fellows' and 'aborigines'. These people lived a very nomadic life, hunting animals, fishing in the rivers, and collecting food such as bird's eggs. They had no domestic animals or cultivated crops. Their homes were rough shelters of stones, tree branches or bark. Their weapons and tools were of wood and stone. Some now work on pastoral stations, while others live in much the same way as did their ancestors.'

This should be compared with Silley's description of aborigines in *Australia and New Zealand*:

'They have only rude notions of government and religion. Infanticide is practised and the aged are butchered. Some are cannibals. They are prone to treachery and massacre, believing in perplexing witchcraft, following queer rites and worshipping weird totems. They are hideously scarred and grotesquely tatooed, wearing ornaments suspended in mutilated ears and noses, and often have the front teeth knocked out.'

and:

'They are content to sleep in hollow concaves in the sand. On the other hand they do sew . . .'

Such a description can hardly avoid creating both distaste and contempt in the mind of the reader, and a general moral deserves to be drawn from it. The quotation from Silley is lurid, and basically unsympathetic towards the aboriginal: it may, strictly speaking, be accurate, but 'treachery' (to what?), 'queer', 'weird', 'grotesque', are not objective descriptive words: they are far more closely related to the attitude of the person describing the aborigines. Their effect is to make the reader feel that the aboriginal is incomprehensible and alien, and thoroughly distasteful. This kind of description provides fertile ground for the growth of prejudice; the former description, on the other hand, while pointing out how primitive the aborigines are, would not discourage people from trying to understand them and see them as human beings.

As has been said, the geography books have a reasonable balance of subject matter. However, the treatment of a specific subject, race relations in South Africa, is interesting. Eight of the twelve geography books deal with South Africa. Two of them do not mention race relations at all. One of them gives half a page to relations between British and Boers, but no space at all to those between white and black. The remaining books generally give rather more attention to relations between British and Boer than to relations between white and black. This inadequacy cannot be explained simply in terms of the fact that racial conflict in South Africa has flared up only recently, for one of the older books (Pickles, 1934) gives an account that is brief but sufficient. This book mentions that while non-European people greatly exceed the European in numbers, they are not allowed to vote and have little educational opportunity, and also indicates that there is a very large difference between the wages of European and African workers. Race relations are now so important in the life of South Africa that one might expect a fuller and more detailed account of this situation, at any rate in the more recent books. Yet generally there is little more than a brief acknowledgement of the fact that the population of South Africa is multi-racial.

Some of the faults found in both the geography and the history books are no doubt due to the age of the books. Six of the history books (out of fourteen), and three of the geography books (out of twelve), are in editions published before 1940, and the pace of development in the 1950s has been so great in the underdeveloped countries that even the most recent textbooks are bound to omit important contemporary changes. This pace of change points to the need to keep textbooks as up to date as possible and suggests that more deliberate efforts should be made in this direction. However, it is not sufficient to explain away all the criticisms made earlier. Generally speaking, the later books tend to be better than the earlier books, but this is not always the case, as may be seen from the dates of the books from which quotations have been taken. If books were brought up to date more quickly, it would be a great step forward. But it would not by itself be enough. The balance and emphasis would still need attention.

The choice of subject matter for geography and history textbooks is, of course, not entirely at the discretion of the authors of the books, for the books used in secondary schools are generally conditioned by the requirements of examiners. The syllabus should not affect the manner or the emphasis employed in teaching a particular area of subject matter. None the less the chief criticisms of the teaching of history, and a substantial criticism of the teaching of geography, relate to subject matter. It therefore seemed important to analyse the requirements of examiners. For this purpose the G.C.E. 'O' and 'A' level syllabuses of the University of London were considered, together with a complete set of history and geography examination papers for January 1960 and summer 1960.

The 'O' level geography syllabus provides for two papers. One paper is concerned with regional geography, but covers only the British Isles and North America or north-west Europe. The other paper has three sections: only one of these, on the subject of world human geography, involves some knowledge about coloured people, or at any rate knowledge of the countries from which they come.

There are three 'A' level papers. One question out of four in the second paper deals with world human geography, and, as in the 'O' level paper, would require some knowledge of the countries from which coloured people come. The subject of the third 'A' level paper is regional geography, and there is a choice of regions that can be studied. Monsoon Asia is one of four alternatives for the first choice, and the second choice is between Africa south of the Sahara, South America, Australia and New Zealand, or the U.S.A. and Canada. Thus the student is not bound to deal with the countries of coloured people: indeed, because north-west Europe and North America both occur in the 'O' level syllabus, there is a considerable likelihood that new ground will not be broken for examination purposes.

Nowhere does the geography syllabus directly touch on race or race relations, though 'geographical aspects of the world distribution of population and types of human settlement', or 'the character and development of settlement, production industries, trade and communications' involves some incidental knowledge of the way of life of coloured people. The kind of knowledge required can be seen from the two sets of examination papers that were inspected. Fairly typical of the questions asked was: 'Compare the East and West coastlands of South Africa'. This could be answered without acknowledging the fact that there were different races in South Africa. Though if one were to write an essay on 'Plantation Agriculture' (one of a choice of five essay topics provided in one question), it would presumably be very difficult to leave out race relations.

The 'O' level history syllabus provides for one paper covering both British history from 55 B.C. to 1939, and European history from 1500 to 1939, specifically including 'developments overseas' and the 'British Empire'. Candidates have to answer 5 out of 96 questions. Of two papers that were examined one contained ten, and the other six questions directly related to events outside Europe, the Near East and North America. But these were almost exclusively on the activities of Europeans, for instance: 'How far would you agree that Warren Hastings deserved praise, blame and sympathy?' There was one question about the Indian Mutiny, but otherwise the only occasion when information about the inhabitants of the empire, as opposed to its rulers, might be required, was a question which demanded short notes on four out of eight topics, one of which was the Indian National Congress.

For 'A' level, one paper on European history and another on English history have to be taken, and the treatment of overseas subjects is very much the same as for 'O' level. The third 'A' level paper is on a special subject. There is a choice of eleven special subjects, one of which is 'The Age of Discovery, 1400-1550' and another, 'The History of the British Empire during the reign of Queen Victoria'. The paper on the Age of Discovery was concerned with the discoverers rather than with what they discovered; for example: 'The aims and motives of Henry the Navigator and his collaborators were complex, and expanded as time went on. Discuss.' However, there was an occasional exception to this rule, such as: 'Compare and contrast the empire of the Aztecs and the Incas.' But as there was a choice of four out of ten questions, it would not be necessary to know about the occasional exception. The orientation of the paper on the British Empire was similar. Thus in the two papers examined, there was one question 'Trace, and account for, the growth of Indian nationalism from the Mutiny to the end of this period', but the rest were much more of the 'How would you distribute responsibility for the Jameson Raid?' variety.

Apart from history and geography, no subjects in the 'O' and 'A' level syllabuses deal at all with coloured people or race relations, with the possible exception of the language papers. A large number of African and Asian languages can be taken at 'O' level, and a smaller number at 'A' level. Learning a language inevitably involves some knowledge of the people who speak it. But what English child takes 'O' level in, say, Ga or Amharic, or ventures into Classical Armenian or Pali for 'A' level?

Any criticism of these syllabuses naturally raises fundamental questions about the purpose and value of teaching history and geography—the kind of questions which can only be discussed briefly here. Part of the value of teaching history, and to a lesser extent geography, arises from the stimulus it gives to the intellect and the imagination; from this point of view it is not particularly important which areas are chosen for study. However, the teaching of history and geography is also important as a means of imparting information about the world. This information should enable a person to know more about current affairs, to interpret the world more intelligently and to take up better informed and more enlightened opinions on the issues that arise from day to day. From this point of view the choice of subject matter is obviously important. As far as the training of the faculties of the mind is concerned, a study of the conflict between the British and French in India in the eighteenth century may be as valuable as a study of the movement for Indian independence. However, for the purpose of understanding the modern world, Indian independence must be accounted of much greater importance. Moreover, quite apart from the particular interpretation put upon the subjects studied, the choice of subject is bound to affect the student's outlook. Thus someone who studies exclusively the history of Europeans is liable to have a Europe-centred view of the world, and Europe will take on a disproportionate importance in his mind. Also he will tend to judge the world from essentially European standards, to identify with the European who is constantly presented as the protagonist of history, and so to misunderstand or even to look down upon the non-European.

This deficiency in teaching has not gone unrecognised. The recent Ministry of Education pamphlet *Schools and the Commonwealth* draws attention to the absence of teaching about the Commonwealth. Much that it says about the way in which Indians and Africans are often presented confirms what has been said here. The pamphlet makes some suggestions about ways in which more teaching about Commonwealth countries could be introduced: one would only add a strong recommendation that G.C.E. syllabuses should be improved, and another in favour of deliberately teaching more current affairs and providing an introduction to subjects such as political science, sociology and anthropology.

The Ministry's argument for widening the curriculum is presented largely in terms of the present-day importance of the Commonwealth to Britain and its great significance in the world. This is a fair enough argument; it has some justice in its own right, and it may in addition be a means of improving teaching about Africans and Asians.

None the less, the arguments for fostering in schools a more enlightened attitude to coloured people should surely go beyond a desire to find in the Commonwealth an up-to-date substitute for the 'white man's burden' and an imperial past. Many of our attitudes are pervaded with a paternalistic or patronising view of coloured people. This view was understandable in an era when Europe was the centre of the world, and the British Empire covered a quarter of it. But many people still see coloured people in terms of the stereotypes left over from that time: the worst and most obviously antipathetic are those of the 'witch doctor' and 'cannibalism' varieties. There are other images, more moderate and not so easily recognisable as stereotypes, which are also objectionable. These picture coloured people as primitive, without any history, culture or civilisation of their own, and as dependent upon the generous, high-minded help of Europeans. The world has changed greatly since those myths were acceptable. The rapid shift of the centres of power away from Europe, and the increasing contacts between peoples of different colours and cultures, give a particular urgency to the dissipation of such ideas.

It is fashionable nowadays, and right too, to pay tribute to ideals of world government and racial equality. Such tribute means little unless there is developed the capacity for understanding the differences between peoples and a genuine sense of equality. These are what schools should foster.

History Textbooks

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